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BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

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SECTION
SIX

Ibanez and Old Sherry

Without Becoming "The Four Horsemen of the Delirium Tremens,"
"La Bodega" Puts Over Clearly the Idea That Wine Is a Robber

WE used to think Spain was *Carmen*. This was wrong. It is—now, at any rate—Vicente Blasco Ibañez. Once it may have been *Sorolla*. For some time, if we recall aright, it was Philip II. All gone! Mantillas and guitars, Alhambra and auto-da-fe—whereabouts? The Spanish procession consists of dark green and brown Zuloaga paintings, captains of industry, Ferreristas with bombs stamped "Made in Barcelona"; influenza in horrid array; Ibañez in twenty novels; corps of translators; and El Rey Alfonso sitting on the beach at San Sebastian or talking economics with Frank A. Vanderlip.

All of these, to be sure; but it is doubtful if any of them matter much except Ibañez. To read the man is to turn the skull into a diorama of modern Spain. Colossal and sinister shapes shadow the pages of his novels. The air is hallucinated. Unlikely persons talk with passionate vision of social Utopias. Meanwhile the bull-fighter treads in red and gold the sand of the arena and the great lady yields herself to him the while she scorns him. Meanwhile the peasants besot themselves with liquor and the workers of the city stew in ignorance and cruelty. It is not pamphleteering, either. It is, nearly always, transcendent art. The novelist paints what he sees; no man can do more and none should do less.

Of course Ibañez is a revolutionist—of a subdued magenta hue. He rises to powerful prose only under the lash of a furious hate. The hate does not mist over his eyes. He would regenerate Spain if he could, or have it achieve self-regeneration, and turn the corridas, or bullfights, into labor forums. All kinds of ideas and all sorts of problems simmer and boil in the vats of his brain. And yet he isn't a moralist, nor an uplifter, nor a philistine, nor a pacifist, nor a vegetarian (we will venture), nor an Irish Chautauqua, like George Bernard Shaw. Take his art as a novelist away from him and he might read like William Allen White. Never like the later Winston Churchill.

II.

The newest of Ibañez's novels in English is *La Bodega*, translated by Isaac Goldberg, who has done a good job. A Spanish bodega is, depending on where you are, anything from a wineshop of the respectable, food serving, family type to a low tavern or saloon in one direction or a general warehouse in the other. It is the wine warehouse that Ibañez's book and title allude to. This is the sort of shed, above ground, that you find in the district of Spain about Jerez de la Frontera (Jerez of the Frontier). It interests everybody except people like William Jennings Bryan to know that Jerez used to be spelled Xerez, the first letter having the sound of "sh"; and hence we get the name of sherry wine. Jerez is about fifteen miles from Cadiz. Dr. Goldberg notes this in a short preface.



Vicente Blasco Ibañez, author of "La Bodega."

He also explains the order of *La Bodega* among Ibañez's novels.

Written in 1903, he says, the book is the third of a series in which the novelist attacks important questions of the day. *The Shadow of the Cathedral* dealt with the influence of the Catholic Church and mediæval governmental methods on Spain. *The Intruder* (*El Intruso*) had the Jesuits as its principal theme. *La Bodega* is written around the wine industry. *The Horde* (*La Horda*) directly followed it.

Those who expect to find in *La Bodega* an indictment of the use of wine will be disappointed, disagreeably or otherwise. Wine's abuse by the working classes, perpetuating ignorance and poverty and enabling men of property to exploit the poor, is what impresses Ibañez.

It has never been settled whether drink is the curse of the working classes or whether work is the curse of the drinking classes. Ibañez evidently thinks the first. Sam Blythe used to argue the second. Sam may be the profounder thinker; but *La Bodega* is in Ibañez's most plausible and incisive vein. All these people of his pages who work for a near-living were evidently born to be lit up. Their employers are no better, probably worse. They spend their lives uncorking bottles that the workers have corked. The worker drinks to forget drudgery and debt; the master drinks to drive the spectre of Bolshevism over the threshold. Maybe, after all, the "social

war" is a contest between red ink and rare old sherry.

III.

"Fermin passed by the door of the structure called the *Tabernacle*—an oval-shaped pavilion with a glass skylight, situated next to the main building that harbored the counting room and the shipping office. The *Tabernacle* contained the choicest products of the concern. A row of upright casks bore upon their oaken paunches the names of famous wines that were used only for bottling; liquids that glittered with all the varied shades of gold, from the reddish splendor of the sunbeam to the pale, velvety gleam of old jewels; wines of gentle fire which, imprisoned in glass dungeons, were destined to be poured out in the misty atmosphere of England, or under the boreal splendors of the Norwegian sky. At the rear of the pavilion, opposite the door, loomed the giants of this silent, motionless assembly—the *Twelve Apostles*, enormous casks of carved oak, as highly polished as if they were the costliest of furniture; presiding over them was the *Christ*, a cask adorned with oak strips fashioned to represent vine branches, similar to the Bacchic bas-relief of an Athenian sculptor. Within its hoops slept a veritable tidal wave of wine—thirty-three *botas* [about 4,125 gallons], according to the firm's records—and the colossus, in its immovability, seemed to be proud of its blood, which was enough to deprive an entire population of its senses."

"In the middle of the *Tabernacle*, upon a round table, were ranged in a circle all the bottles of the firm, from the almost fabulous wine—a century old—which is sold at thirty francs for the stormy celebrations of archdukes, grand dukes and worldly celebrities, to the popular sherry that grows to a sad old age in the show windows of restaurants and helps the poor man in illness."

"The blender was an old man, who seemed to have been inflated by the atmosphere in which he lived. His skin, fretted with wrinkles, glistened with an everlasting moisture, as if the volatilized wine had penetrated through all his pores and were trickling down the edge of his mustache in the form of tears."

"The luminous golden wines sparkled in the air, crowned with jewels as they were poured into the glass, filling the atmosphere with an intense odor of antiquity. All the shades of amber, from soft gray to pale yellow, glittered in these fluids, as thick as oil to the sight, yet of a glistening transparency. A faint exotic perfume, which summoned to thought fantastic flowers of a supernatural world, rose over the liquids extracted from the mystery of the casks. Life seemed to expand upon tasting them; the blood began to burn, bounding more quickly through the veins; the sense of smell, quickened to unknown desires, grew excited as if scenting a new electricity."

With no wish to harrow the sensibilities of those to whom to-morrow may be a doomsday, it is almost necessary—and surely desirable—to reproduce these descriptive fragments from the first chapter of *La Bodega*. They show, as nothing at second hand could, the splendor of Ibañez's prose, which is not only poetic but profoundly imaginative without in the least departing from its character of a faithful transcription of things present to the five senses.

IV.

The two outstanding characters, of many vividly drawn, are the Marquis de San Dionisio, a luxurious old debauchee who riots over the countryside, and Fernando Salvatierra, an ascetic revolutionist, a much wandering and much imprisoned Ulysses of the social rebel type. Well, no; hardly that. He is too pale, too meek, too mild, too pitiful; "Salvatierra felt his anger disappear; faith and hope were returning," Ibañez tells us at the close of the book. That close is very striking in its final paragraph, embodying the hopeful dream and ultimate faith of Salvatierra—perhaps of Ibañez himself. It envisages the poor of the cities repelling "the false solace of wine," and rising to follow him who is "insulted by the name of Devil . . . who was once called Lucifer, and is now called Revolution . . . Social Revolution!" And this though the rustics remain in the country, "with the resigned gravity of cattle." Perhaps.

LA BODEGA (THE FRUIT OF THE VINE). BY VICENTE BLASCO IBAÑEZ. E. P. Dutton & Co. \$1.90.